Journal of Northern Studies

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The *Journal of Northern Studies* is a peer-reviewed academic publication issued twice a year. The journal has a specific focus on human activities in northern spaces, and articles concentrate on people as cultural beings, people in society and the interaction between people and the northern environment. In many cases, the contributions represent exciting interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary approaches. Apart from scholarly articles, the journal contains a review section, and a section with reports and information on issues relevant for Northern Studies.

The journal is published by Umeå University and Sweden's northernmost Royal Academy, the Royal Skyttean Society.

UMEÅ UNIVERSITY

ISSN 1654–5915

Journal of Northern Studies

Vol. 15 • No. 1 • 2021

Published by Umeå University & The Royal Skyttean Society

Umeå 2021

The *Journal of Northern Studies* is published with support from The Royal Skyttean Society and Umeå University at www.jns.org.umu.se

For instructions to authors, see www.jns.org.umu.se

ISSN 1654-5915

Cover picture
Scandinavia Satellite and sensor: NOAA, AVHRR
Level above earth: 840 km
Image supplied by METRIA, a division of Lantmäteriet, Sweden.
www.metria.se
NOAAR. cESA/Eurimage 2001. cMetria Satellus 2001

Design and layout
Leena Hortéll, Ord & Co i Umeå AB
Fonts: Berling Nova and Futura

Contents

Editors & Editorial board 6

Articles

Ken Coates & Carin Holroyd, Northern Sweden and Economic Development 7

Katarina Gregersdotter, North Actually. The Meaning of Place in Åsa Larsson's Crime Novels About Rebecka Martinsson 25

Bo Nilsson, Rural Resilience and Voluntary Work in the North of Sweden. An Ambiguous Relationship 37

Reviews

Roger Andersson (ed.), *Heliga Birgittas texter på fornsvenska. Birgittas Uppenbarelser*, vol. 4, Stockholm: Sällskapet Runica et Mediævalia 2018 (*Lars-Erik Edlund*) 55

Dansk sproghistorie. Vol. 2. Ord for ord for ord, Aarhus: Aarhus Universitetsforlag 2018 (*Lars-Erik Edlund*) 56

Dansk sproghistorie Vol. 3. Bøjning og bygning, Aarhus: Aarhus Universitetsforlag 2019 (*Lars-Erik Edlund*) 58

Kåre Hoel, *Bustadnavn i Østfold 18. Trøgstad. Utgitt av Institutt for lingvistiske og nordiske studier, Universitetet i Oslo ved Tom Schmidt*, Oslo: Novus Forlag 2019 (*Lars-Erik Edlund*) 59

Anu Lahtinen & Mia Korpiola (eds.), *Dying Prepared in Medieval and Early Modern Northern Europe*, Leiden: Brill 2018 (*Margaret Cormack*) 61

Shane McCorristine, *The Spectral Arctic. A History of Dreams and Ghosts in Polar Exploration*, London: University College London Press 2018 (*Pär Eliasson*) 63

Norsk språkhistorie. Vol. 2: Praksis, Oslo: Novus Forlag 2018 (*Lars-Erik Edlund*) 66

Norsk språkhistorie. Vol. 3: Ideologi, Oslo: Novus Forlag 2018 (*Lars-Erik Edlund*) 67

Norsk språkhistorie. Vol. 4: Tidslinjer, Oslo: Novus Forlag 2018 (*Lars-Erik Edlund*) 69

Roland Scheel (ed.), *Narrating Law and Laws of Narration in Medieval Scandinavia*, Berlin: Walter de Gruyter 2020 (*Dieter Strauch*) 71

Birgitte Sonne, *Worldviews of the Greenlanders. An Inuit Arctic Perspective*, Fairbanks: University of Alaska Press *2017* (*Håkan Rydving*) 75

Per-Axel Wiktorsson (ed.), *Fornsvenska legendariet*, *vols. 1–4*, Skara: Svenska Fornskriftsällskapet & Skara Stiftshistoriska Sällskap 2020 (*Lars-Erik Edlund*) 81

opportunities for in-depth reading. We are very grateful that this knowledgeable work is now completed, rapidly and successfully.

Lars-Erik Edlund
Dept. of Language Studies
Umeå University
Sweden
lars-erik.edlund@umu.se

Roland Scheel (ed.), *Narrating Law and Laws of Narration in Medieval Scandinavia* (Ergänzungsbände zum Reallexikon der Germanischen Altertumskunde, vol. 117, eds: Sebastian Brather, Wilhelm Heizmann & Steffen Patzold), Berlin: Walter de Gruyter 2020, ISBN 9783110654219, eISBN (PDF) 9783110661191, eISBN (EPub) 9783110662320, ISSN 1866-7678, x + 295 pp.

The volume comprises an introductory chapter by Roland Scheel: "Narrating law and laws of narration." The first contributor is Jón Viðar Sigurðsson. The title of his contribution is "Chieftains and the Legal Culture in Iceland c. 1100–1260" (pp. 39–55). First he shows, the political and legal structure of Iceland according to *Grágás*. Although the legal system of Iceland is presented by the *Grágás*, there is neither an assessment of a judgement after the prescriptions of *Vígslóði* nor of *Baugatal* because the law in Iceland appears rather to be part of the power play between opponents among the magnates, who had much skill in acquisitions of resources and acted for an arbitrated settlement. The manuscripts of the *Grágás* are not an official collection of laws, but a private collection. After the subjugation of the Icelanders under the Norwegian crown the king gave them new laws in 1271, the *Járnsíða*. On the one hand handling of the law was part of the powergame between opponents among the magnates, but on the other hand the law was powerful because it did not take into account, that there were settlements negotiated. The actions in the sagas demonstrate that the magnates were anxious that their business and their deeds were lawful. It appears therefore, that law was not identical with the written law, but based upon shared knowledge of the magnates and the law was ready to be converted into a powerful resource for them.

Hans Jacob Orning analyses in his contribution (pp. 57–76) "Making King Hákon great again. Law, God, morality and power in Björgvin, 1223." This meeting intended to find out, who was the rightful king of Norway. The status of the law in this meeting as described in *Hákonar saga Hákonarsonar* was precarious because there were five claimants to the throne invoked, underlining that "law was not a sharply defined text but a corpus of rules open to negotiation." King Hákon emerged victorious from the struggle with Skúli because he was the successful player in that game. He had his natural/legal/divine/right to rule maintained. The power game at the meeting was vested in legal garments according to *Hákonar saga*. But law was not only at the mercy of raw power because the difference between these options is also shown by the ambiguity of God's will in the interpretation of ordeals. Before the state built robust legal institutions, other means were used to establish connections between appearence and essence. The alternatives were not reduced to law versus power, the sagas of the 1220s show how a mix of law, God, morality and power interacted to establish truth and this made king Hákon great.

Ármann Jakobsson writes upon "Law personified. The ignored climatic speeches of Brennu-Njáls saga" (pp. 77–87). In this saga Njál is the legal hero. This is shown in the outstanding legal procedures finishing the conflict between Mörðr and Hrútr, and ending the alliance of Gunnar and Njál. His remarkable achievements of establishing of the Fifth Court and Iceland's Christianisation are contrasted by his sons's vain attemps to get the support of the entire Icelandic elite after the killing of Höskuldr Þráinsson. Njál is not only the protagonist of the saga, but he is embodying the law of the late Mörðr gígja Sighvatsson, all his life and until the legal procedures at the *alþing* after his death and that of his sons'. Because there was no one to replace him adequately this seems to have been the reason why the law was so ineffective thereafter. Furthermore, by chronicling the breakdown of the legal procedure and by describing the resultant battle this parallels how Iceland's society developed in the battles between 1238 and 1246 and how it made them seek help with the Norwegian king to keep peace in Iceland.

Hannah Burrows is treating "Court poetry. Assemblies and skaldic verse" (pp. 91–116). The quotation of skaldic verse at an assembly is a comparatively unusual event in the sagas. But sometimes there are a few examples in which skaldic verse is said to be enough to incite legal action. In Norway poetry was a common means of communication, Skalds and patrons tried to maintain the poetic justice of skaldic poetry. On the one hand, particularly the saga authors used to present skaldic verse as a powerful tool in legal matters. On the other hand an assembly could be a dangerous arena for the recitation of skaldic verse, particularly the *Grágás* has special provisions against reciting insult to a person at *lögberg*. The offender is subject to full outlawry and forfeited his immunity for a year. But the chances of offending more people and wanting to take immediate revenge are much higher at an assembly like the *alþing*. Sometimes placing verse into an assembly was—as the author has shown—an effective way of heightening tension, allowing to alternate voices and critiquing law and justice. Therefore þing-poetry can be found in Old Norse narrative, for instance Hjalte Skeggjason's poetic *níð* against Freyja was spoken at Lögberg as Iceland debated its conversion to christianity (*Íslendingabók* Ch. 7).

Kyle Hughes contributes "What is 'good law.' Law as communal performance in the Íslendinga-sögur" (pp. 117–133). In Iceland disputes were generally ruled by settlements and not by resolutions. Hughes demonstrates, that the significance of the Law within the family sagas is inextricably interwoven with the polity and thus with communal performance being a corporate aspect, which is guaranteed by the supporters und arbitrators. These persons must find a balance between personal honour und social stability to make law good. By that the *Grágas* laws are not enforced, but they are based upon interpretations of the laws and they constitute law as far as they prove repeatedly to be effective in the majority of cases. As a result law encodes the narrative conflict and good law vindicates the community.

Roland Scheel—after having given an introduction on "narrating law und laws of narration" in the north, especially in Iceland (pp. 1–20)— is overviewing some Icelandic sagas in the chapter "Revenge or settlement? Law and feud in early sagas of Icelanders" (pp. 135–167). When the skalds don't stress one larger feud but stretch their narration over years like in *Laxdœla saga*, the authors do not focus on revenge and escalation, but focus on peacemaking through wise arbitrators who settle the disputes. Successful revenge usually happens within the frame permitted by written law in these early texts, and the free will of the characters and the necessity of moderation are stressed through the constellation of characters and their fate. But the early sagas demonstrate how the Icelandic form of government without a central authority could work: they keep to the law and apply it in the

sense of equity in their settlements. If a law was broken, they reacted in patterns of norms, which constitute law in an anthropological sense. In the *Samtíðarsögur* from 1236 onwards the struggles among the chieftains obtain a new fashion: Sturla Sighvatsson tried to crush the other magnates and tried to establish a single rule in the name of the Norwegian king. From then on the magnates especially in *Sturlunga saga* caused no more trouble about justice and equity.

Keith Ruiter gives a study of "Berserks behaving badly. Manipulating normative expectations in *Eyrbyggja saga*" (pp. 171–184). Styrr's brother Vémunðr brings two powerful Swedish berserks, Halli and Leiknir, to his farm to increase his prestige. They are good allies, but their tempers need to be kept in check. After a short time Halli tries to marry Styrr's daughter Ásdís claiming that the physical support of him and his brother makes him a better match for Ásdís than the wealth or power of any farmer in the district. After discussing the issue with his neighbour Snorri goði, Styrr comes to the conclusion that Halli under common understandings is only a servant and not compatible with his honour, his kin group and his social network. Therefore a marriage with his daughter was out of the question, particularly since Snorri goði himself wants to marry Ásdís. Therefore Styrr kills both berserks in his bathroom. This killing can be understood as a rectification of social balance after the attempted assault of Styrr's daughter and his honour. Morality, honour and law were forming a complex of normative expectations, which were causally related to his conduct. Styrr was not able to follow only the law, but had to weigh the social consequences of his doing.

Daniela Hahn discusses "Social and diegetic hierarchies in cases of thievery. A study of *Mǫðruvallabók*" (pp. 185–202). The property disputes in the Icelandic sagas are always connected to power and honour. While the legal texts seem to assume that both parties are equal in the eyes of the law, the narratives portray a hierarchical society. In the fourteenth-century *Mǫðruvallabók* there is a group of 144 theft cases committed in Iceland. They are solved by five acts of revenge, two direct settlements and seven potential court proceedings; of these two are abandoned and five result in a settlement (self-judgement). But not a single person is condemned of thievery. There are crimes that are more likely to be brought to court than others. Rán is most often counteracted with acts of violent vengeance, while þjófnaðr ['theft'] most often leads to a lawsuit, because a thief comes in secret, most often because he fears the reaction of his victim. Like within a feud the little man's chance in the process lies in winning powerful supporters, especially if they want to harm the defendant for other personal reasons and because of that start a dispute. In medieval Iceland people were in principle equal in the eye of the law, but neither in common view nor in legal practice. Already in case of theft the state authority takes the position that a chart in court is perceived as an insult as worthy of a high degree of punishment as the theft itself and the bravest men approve of that.

Heike Sahm studies "Feudal law and gift economy. The discussion of different social systems in the queens' dispute in the *Nibelungenlied*" (pp. 205–224). Prünhilt shows the view, that Sîvrit, Kriemhilt's husband, holds a position of inferiority as Gunther's vasall, to find confirmation of the legal situation. When Kriemhilt comments in praise of her husband suggesting an inversion of this hierarchy, Prünhilt is provoked. She argues that customary privileges are granted to those of a higher social standing than a subordinate and she claims to be entitled to the customary privileges granted to those of a higher social standing than an subordinate: her position being higher than that of Kriemhilt and Sîvrit. He is a territorial sovereign, but in the queens' dispute the relationship between *herre* and *man* remains unclear. All the heroes live at the court in close proximity to the king. There

is no mention of a feudal relationship. In the outer court all are bound to the court by gifts. Sîvrit has increased his prestige and the potency of his kingdom by conquering the greatest treasure that ever a hero could gain. Therefore Gunther again aspires to asserting equal status in the manner guests are welcomed. But Prünhilt does not share Gunther's wishes. The epicist brings the queens' dispute into profile by playing the structures of social order against each other and having the validity of each disputed by one of the queens. The argumentation in their dispute follows archaizing lines (feudal law) by Prünhilt, and contemporary lines (gift economy) by Kriemhilt.

Jiří Starý contributres "History or idea? The legendary laws of Old Norsemen" (pp. 225–253). Are legendary laws remnants of ancient lawgiving? For this question no universal answer can be given. The issuing of an old law and a probably "nonsense" in it says nothing about its validity. Already Cicero said: *Sive fuit sive non fuit, nihil ad rem; loquimur quod traditum est* ['Whether it happened, whether it did not happen, it does not matter here. We just reproduce what the tradition reports']. Legendary lawgiving belongs primarily to the realm of legends, it resides in the neighbourhood of heroic stories and myths. On p. 234 the author mentions Eskil Magnusson, who created the Swedish *Västgötalag*. He was no legendary, but a historical person, of whom we know personal details. Similarly he proves to tell about Frederic the Great und his quarrel with the miller Graevenitz of Sanssouci (p. 246, footnote 57). This tale is nothing but a manufactured myth, which did not really happen (cf. Vilsen & Wadewitz 2006). But Jiří Starý is right to assume that the legendary laws are part of the culture and history of law exactly to the extent of which the reasoning is a part of history and culture.

Anne Irene Riisøy discusses "Vǫlundr—a gateway into the legal world of the Vikings" (pp. 255–273). In her paper she explores the jural world of Eddic poems which traditionally are associated with the Old Norse pagan religion. In its traditional form the palimpsest *Vǫlundarkviða* contains names, themes, and terminology drawn from a wide area, and these elements were added to the tale at different times, beneath them genuine pre-Christian legal notions. One option was to claim compensation, but it was more honorable to retaliate, and revenge was a powerful feature not only in the mythological world, but in the real world as well. In contrast to *Grágás* the earliest Norwegian provincial laws stressed the obligation to take revenge.

Matthias Teichert tributes "Týr, Fenrir and the *Brísingamen*. Tales of law, crime, and violence in Eddic mythology and their Indo-European subcontexts" (pp. 275–288). The central idea of Týr having lost his hand belongs to the Migration period, an era long before Óðinn took over und usurped the top of Asgard. Both share the trait of a physical handicap: Týr has lost his right hand, Óðinn lost one eye. Fenrir is a fiend being so powerful and menacing that he cannot be vanquished in the ordinary way. Keeping Fenrir under control requires a physical sacrifice and systematic lawbreaking and oathbreaking involving the deity of Týr. His sacrifice is necessary to keep the cosmic order by using violence against Fenrir.

The twelve contributions are all showing a considerable progress in understanding the changing conditions between law and laws of narration in medieval Scandinavia.

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Dieter Strauch
University of Cologne
Germany
dieter.strauch@uni-koeln.de